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ABSTRACT

The advantages of using journals in the college classroom are their versatility and their transferability to teaching at every level. Three types of journal writing are very effective in engaging students in purposeful, repeated writing: individual journals in which student and teacher maintain a written dialogue throughout the course; class journals which are used by an entire class and are usually placed on library reserve; and cooperative learning group journals in which group members share ideas with each other and the teacher. Additionally, the teacher and students can share ideas about improving journal formats. An example of these other formats is the multiple, themed, class journals in three-ring binders, with titled covers, with contributions on the top half of a page and comments on the lower half, which are shared across classes. (KEH)

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"Writing a conversation: Journals in the college classroom"

NCTE 1989 Spring Conference, Charleston SC, April 8, 1989

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The advantages of journals in the college classroom are their versatility and their transferability to teaching at every level. Journals engage students in purposeful, repeated writing and they are the best device I know for getting to know, most thoroughly, the greatest number of students. Some students are remembered primarily for their contributions to classroom discussions, for special talents, or for some vivid personal trait, but for getting past a bland acquaintance, with almost every student, journals are best. I enjoy getting to know my students and I attempt -- without universal success -- to remember their names in future years. I've discovered that information usually comes back to me in stages when we meet after an interval: first the person looks familiar; *then I have a visual memory of the person's handwriting;* then there are a flood of specific memories; then -- perhaps with a little help -- the name comes to me.

The most important guideline I can think of, in describing how to use journals, is that it's essential to have a written conversation be the goal of journal writing. Respond to the ideas of others with ideas of your own. Resist the impulse to respond to students with corrections or guidance about their writing. *RESIST! RESIST! RESIST!* I speak and write with feeling on this issue, because my mistakes in this area have been manifold and persistent, and because recalling those mistakes makes me unhappy. Reading over a journal, and seeing that my response to a

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student's entry describing her childhood pain in a family situation was (in part) to explain to her that she was using bequest when she meant behest, makes me writhe.

My own impulse to correct is very strong. In most cases, I truly do know much more about written language than my students do. Moreover I believe strongly that it may -- indeed that it *should* -- hamper a person's career if apostrophes are misused; if effect and affect are used interchangeably; if idioms -- that doesn't jive with what I learned before -- are twisted; if suprise and persistant and challange and concientous are misspelled. Writing is a marvelous tool for identifying language conventions which need to be learned. When my students say, "I should *of* gone to that lecture" or "What are we *suppose* to do?" or "I have *alot* of work" their speech sounds correct; when they write, I can identify the errors.

I am still struggling to find the best ways to teach grammar and spelling while I teach whatever courses my students and I are engaged in, but I *know*, from painful experience, that -- however precious the written word is to me -- corrections in journals stifle and spoil communication. What would happen to a conversation if one person described a dramatic personal experience and the other replied by explaining the difference between lie and lay?

Part of the fun of using any versatile teaching method is trying to get it exactly right. I think there isn't one right style of journal, but I continue to enjoy shaping the journal technique, usually making major or minor changes almost every term. Journals, as I use them, are for sharing ideas about course-related topics, and my

students and I interpret "course-related" broadly. In most journals, personal experiences and feelings appear as a theme early, and inspire continuing contributions.

I've used three types of journals: individual journals -- each student has a notebook in which student and teacher maintain a written dialogue throughout the course; class journals -- one journal, usually placed on library reserve, is used by an entire class; and cooperative learning group journals -- each cooperative learning group has its own journal, in which group members share ideas with each other and with me.

Individual journals

Individual journals have the advantages and disadvantages produced by the individuality among students. There are vast differences in topics, style and length. Some students have filled entire notebooks during an eight-week summer course; in other journals the student's contributions and mine yield ten pages. Some students develop elaborate systems of numbering and color coding so that we can refer back to each other's previous entries. One interesting feature is that, to the extent that there is an expectation that women will write extensively and men will not, male students who are reluctant to violate a stereotype may be less reluctant to write. In my experience, men have written more fluently in the individual journals than in any other format, though the individual journals do not inspire fluency in everyone.

In terms of practicalities, students supply their own journals, and the method works best if classes meet twice a week: the student has the journal over the weekend, turns it in on the first class session of the week and gets it back at the second session. With large classes, this typically means that I spend one long evening on Tuesday or Wednesday surrounded by notebooks, writing as fast as I can. The individual journal format is the easiest to explain and institute. Students can readily see how individual journals can be used in their classrooms, and perhaps this type of journal fits most conveniently into programs which meet daily.

Individual journals, at their best, constitute exciting, wide-ranging conversations between two people who are willing to accept risks and take time in order to share ideas in writing. The conversation runs back and forth across time, because the written words can be reread and reconsidered, as spoken words cannot. But the intimacy which is the primary reason for the strength of the individual journal is also its weakness: other students do not share in the conversation. Even though I still continue some written conversations, begun in individual journals, with former students, I do not think I will use this technique again in my classes, except as an occasional, optional supplement.

Class journals

Class journals are the obvious solution when student-student communication is a goal. Changing from individual to group journals solves one problem and presents a brand new set of challenges, of which the location of the journal is the most pesky for both students and teacher. If thoughts and feelings are permitted as journal

theme, two recurring topics will be guilt at not having written earlier or more often, and irritation at how tough it is to find time to get to the library and how this problem is exacerbated if the journal is "out." The class journal works better, in my experience, with undergraduate classes, because most undergraduates spend more time on campus than graduate students do, and expect to use the college library as a study area.

My system has been to buy one journal per class and -- after some abortive attempts to find a location I could get to more easily -- to put journals on library reserve. I bring the journal to the first class session and everyone signs in on the first page; thereafter contributions are usually signed with initials, and the conversations use those initials as nominatives of address, even though classmates know each other's names, and mine. When the journal is opened flat, the page on the right is for original contributions and the facing page, on the left, is for comments on those ideas. Here's an example, with the first message one of two on a right-hand page, and the others comments from the facing page. I am JMJ.

Just a quick note after class. I have to go teach an hour long lesson in my writing class in about 45 min. I'm NERVOUS! Hopefully all will go well. I'm heading back to Baltimore tomorrow! I can't wait. I don't think I'll get any observation time in this visit though. I have to spend all day Friday doing ...HOMEWORK!

I really agree with JMJ about what she said in class today about reading a lot to broaden our knowledge base. I can get an A in all my classes but I am quite ignorant when it comes to wide knowledge and trivia matters. I hope to slowly change this but it's hard to find time to read things besides what's required for classes. TC

I'm really depressed about not getting spare time to read also. I really got into reading last summer but this next spring and summer I will be going to school full time to finish up. I get really depressed not having that to look forward to (reading). I guess I'll just have to make time. CB

I agree TC -- when you're in college, finding time to read materials that aren't assigned is difficult. I hope I can improve my "wide" knowledge too. TL

One quick point about reading from the voice of experience -- as things come up that you hear about -- Really Want to Read -- keep a list. Then when you have a break from school pick a few to take out of the library. Alternative list -- subjects to find books about when you get time. Keep list handy and often PRESTO! productive vacations! SG

When group journals thrive -- as did the one quoted above -- it's because students take hold and make the journal their own. A recurrent challenge, for me, in any journal format, is to get away from the top-down style in which students share their concerns and questions and I share my knowledge. It's a tempting style for the students -- who are on safe ground, and for me -- the role of authority figure has its delights.

One term I tried exchanging notes in folders as a communication device in one course (it didn't work well), and I had three class journals on library reserve. For a variety of reasons, during the middle of the term I concentrated on responding to the graduate students and neglected the two undergraduate journals. In one case this caused problems. I realized afterwards that many students were using their journal to ask me questions, which remained unanswered far too long. But in the other journal, the students began answering each other's questions.

When I finally settled down to a long session of journal writing, I began reading at the point I'd left off, and writing at the point where the current writing in the journal left off. As I read from the middle of the journal, I wrote a series of messages, beginning at a much later page, in response to items on the earlier pages, using initials and page numbers to organize the conversation. Students had asked about thorny points in the text, and I explained them; students said they were having

problems and I gave them the solutions. Then, as I continued to work forward in my reading, behold! the explanations and solutions were there already -- given by other students, and right on target. It was about at this time that a colleague explained to me the concept of the Atlas complex -- the view, which many teachers suffer from, that they, and they alone, hold the world on their shoulders. I found it very apt.

Class journals, then, lack the variation in contributions within a class that individual journals have, but each class journal develops a distinctive style and flavor, often set by the most frequent contributors. One feature of successful class journals is a welcomingness with which students encourage each other's ideas and which is more effective than any words or actions of mine.

This format also is readily transferable to K-12 classrooms, and many students express an eagerness to try it. Ownership of the journal is a concern. At the end of classes using individual journals, the students have their journals to save or discard as they wish (though I have sometimes requested permission to copy and quote). A disadvantage of the group journals is that the students can possess only recollections, not the written exchanges.

Cooperative learning group journals.

Currently I use multiple journals in all my classes. I begin each journal with a cooperative learning group, and move the journals around as cooperative learning groups change. This format has advantages of ease, practicality, and encouragement to share which make it preferable to either individual or class journals. *(Can improvements be made? See below!)*

Because group journals are used by students only in class (unless a student borrows a journal between classes) neither I nor the students have difficulty in getting at them. I encourage students to write contributions outside of class to tape or staple into their journals, but most of the writing occurs during cooperative learning time in class. Once a week, my classes engage in what I call SSSR --*Structured* Sustained Silent Reading. The structure indicated by the extra *S* occurs because students choose their reading from a wide variety of professional articles. Reading and writing in group journals is also an SSSR option. The drawbacks of this format are simply minor versions of the disadvantages of the other journal styles: students are not conversing with every classmate; and it takes a while, in most groups, to establish effective student-to-student responding.

Supplementary journals

It is possible, of course, to use a variety of journals simultaneously. This term, a new journal style is serving a special purpose in one of my classes, providing a solution which I don't believe would have occurred to me if I were not journal-experienced.

It is typical for several of the students in my undergraduate classes to be older -- I have recently learned that the term is "chronologically advantaged." These students enrich the class and typically work very well with classmates. Most of them are women, and many of them are single parents. For some, life has been psychologically bruising, and for a few, the opportunity to be listened to with interest and respect is a little miracle.

Early in this term I saw that one intelligent and articulate student wanted to talk about everything. Each item in a lecture interested her; each contribution made by another student to a discussion inspired her. Her ideas bubbled; her hand waved for attention. The disadvantage of all this knowledge so generously shared was that too much classtime was absorbed by it.

We met after class and I talked about the need I perceived for a better balance in class contributions. She talked to me about an oppressive marriage and the experiences which made meeting others and sharing her ideas such a delight. Our solution was a dialogue journal.

In class she continues to be a strong contributor, but she paces herself by also jotting down ideas in a small notebook which she turns in at the end of class, and which I read and respond to and return to her at the beginning of the next class. Since there are always papers coming in to my "inbasket" and being returned to students, our journal does not attract attention (though I think neither of us would mind if it did). I welcome her ideas, which sometimes provide useful guidance -- once to make a point I used an impromptu illustration of an encounter between two different dinosaurs, which, my knowledgeable student pointed out, had not lived at the same time.

What's next?

My students and I share an interest in improving journal formats. Vigorous informal discussions have shown me that some students are even more facile than I

in coming up with complicated ideas: *what about loose-leaf notebooks and having every student use a different color paper? (I like it, but the logistics seem overwhelming.)* Combining many, though not all, student suggestions with my own ideas, I look forward eagerly to trying a new format: multiple, *themed, class journals* in three-ring binders, with titled covers, with contributions on the top half of a page and comments on the lower half, which will be *shared across classes.* Thrilling! We'll brainstorm a list of themes, and I'll have extra notebooks so we can add more as we go on. Now what will the problems be? Well, the journals won't be borrowable between classes because all classes will be sharing ... unless we have an extra, all-purpose, journal for contributions to journals which are temporarily "out." Good! And the cooperative learning groups can, informally, take responsibility for getting the pages out of that journal and into the themed journals where they belong. Will there be problems I don't foresee? I foresee that there will. Will there be advantages I can't yet anticipate? I'm confident of it. *I can hardly wait!*